

Navigating Paul

An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts

Jouette M. Bassler

Westminster John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE • LONDON

Contents

Preface	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Chapter 1. Grace: Probing Its Limits	1
Chapter 2. Paul and the Jewish Law	11
Chapter 3. Faith	23
Chapter 4. In Christ: Mystical Reality or Mere Metaphor?	35
Chapter 5. The Righteousness of God	49
Chapter 6. The Future of “Israel”: Who Is Israel?	71
Chapter 7. “Then Comes the End . . .”: The Parousia and the Resurrection of the Dead	87
Endnotes	97
Bibliography	121
Index of Ancient Sources	129
Index of Modern Authors	135
Index of Subjects	137

GRACE

Probing Its Limits

It is significantly harder to write on the Pauline concept of grace now than it was twenty, fifteen, or even ten years ago. The general agreement about the basic structure of Paul's theology that prevailed not too many years ago has collapsed and been replaced by the chaos of vigorous debate.¹ In that debate, even old certitudes about grace, that most characteristic component of Paul's theology, have been shaken. Few would deny the basic premise that grace is central to Paul's thought,² but few would also now deny that grace was central to almost all forms of first-century Judaism. Furthermore, with the blinders of old assumptions removed, it has become clear that Paul, no less than his Jewish contemporaries, affirmed not *sola gratia* in the strict sense of the words but grace *and* a judgment according to deeds.³ And so new questions emerge: In what ways are Paul's views on grace distinctive? And against what views was his most polemical grace-language directed?

Grace All Around

Since the publication of E. P. Sanders's landmark study of Palestinian Judaism, old dogmas about Jewish legalism have become difficult to sustain.⁴ Tackling the pervasive image of first-century Judaism as a legalistic (i.e., works-based) religion that left its adherents struggling to earn salvation under a grace-less code of merits, Sanders demonstrated that the primary texts of Palestinian Judaism reveal no such thing. He found a pattern of religion in which obedience to the law was of undeniable importance, but this obedience was framed, defined, and sustained by initiatives of divine grace.⁵

Israel's covenant relationship with God was, after all, established not by merit but through election, an act of pure grace, and salvation was assured to those within the covenant. To be sure, obedience to the law—or intent to obey the law—was required to *maintain* one's status within the covenant. This obedience was not, however, measured against a rigid system of merits and demerits. What was expected was faithfulness, not perfection, and God's grace was manifested again through divine forgiveness and in the provision of means of atonement for those who repented of their transgressions.

In the sectarian Judaism identified with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the impact of grace on the individual is even more pronounced. Because the sectary was not born into the community of the new covenant but joined through an act of repentance, there is a deeper sense of the individual, not the nation, as the object of election grace in these writings. And the role of grace in overcoming human sinfulness and enabling fulfillment of the law is more pronounced (as is the demand for obedience): "For Thou knowest the inclination of Thy servant, that I have not relied [upon the works of my hands] to raise up [my heart]. . . . I have no fleshly refuge; [and Thy servant has] no righteous deeds to deliver him from the [Pit of no] forgiveness. But I lean on the abun[dance of Thy mercies] and hope [for the greatness] of Thy grace, that Thou wilt bring [salvation] to flower."⁶

Much of this sounds, of course, like Paul (as more than one commentator has observed),⁷ which serves to underscore the fact that the language of grace and an active religious concept of grace were well established in Paul's world.⁸ The apostle had a rich tradition upon which to draw, and much that he had to say about grace, though of profound theological significance, was not theologically distinctive. Thus, for example, the numerous Pauline references to undeserved acts of divine favor or kindness—whether in calling, choosing, or justifying—reflected, in a Christ-centered key, ideas current in first-century Judaism.⁹ It is valid to distinguish between a static view of election grace characteristic of those groups into which one is born, and a dynamic view characteristic of groups to which one is converted.¹⁰ Even the former, however, possessed a dynamic sense of forgiving grace and an active piety resting on it.

The opposition of sin and grace is a complex matter. Certainly in first-century Judaism divine forgiveness and means of atonement were understood as manifestations of God's grace, and certainly this forgiveness-grace was understood to be sufficient for every transgression.¹¹ Thus Paul's claim that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"

(Rom 5:20) would not be incomprehensible within the framework of Jewish thought. Yet Paul goes further. As he begins to describe sin, no longer in terms of transgressions but as a power exercising absolute control over human lives (Rom 5–7), he moves beyond typical Jewish understanding.¹² His comments on grace develop along similar lines (“grace might also exercise dominion,” Rom 5:21; see also 6:14–15); and here too he moves beyond typical Jewish expression. But the differences are more of degree than of substance. Paul had a more pessimistic view of human nature than most of his Jewish contemporaries,¹³ evoking a more powerful image of divine grace. Yet Paul’s presentation of the sin-grace dichotomy as an opposition of powerful forces can be seen as an extension of traditional Jewish confidence in the ability of divine grace to overcome sins. It does not represent an altogether new development in the concept of grace.¹⁴

Yet that is not the complete picture. Paul’s understanding of grace was not only rooted in his Jewish world; it was also shaped by his encounter with Jesus, by his struggles with his churches, and by his subsequent theological reflection. Thus in his discussions of suffering and the law, grace acquires distinctive overtones characteristic of his thought alone.

The Grace of Suffering

First-century Judaism knew of a connection between grace and suffering.¹⁵ Suffering could be understood as the grace-filled means by which God led persons to repentance. Suffering could also be seen as the God-given means for individuals to atone for their sins in this world, thereby preserving for themselves a reward in the world to come. In some circles the suffering of righteous martyrs was held to make amends for the sins of others. For Paul, though, the connection was entirely different. He embraced, of course, the conviction of the early church that all the grace of atonement was concentrated in the once-for-all event of the cross (Rom 3:24–25)¹⁶—Jesus’ death “for us” or “on our behalf” (Greek *hyper hēmōn*, Rom 5:8)—which made amends for human sins.¹⁷ Yet Paul could also say to the Philippians, “[God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, *but of suffering for him as well*” (Phil 1:29).¹⁸ Grace was involved not only in Christ’s death for them, but also in their suffering “for Christ” (Greek *hyper Christou*). But how was that possible? And how was it “grace”? We need to look at the context of this statement in Philippians.

Paul knew and expressed various understandings of human suffering.¹⁹

He knew—because he experienced it—that God provides the power to endure suffering (1 Thess 1:6; 2 Cor 1:3–11; 4:7–12). He knew also—because it was revealed to him (2 Cor 12:7–10)—that when God’s power is exercised through human instruments, it is most clearly known to be *God’s* power when those instruments are themselves most obviously without power of their own. So suffering is the lot of the apostle, in order that God’s power may be perfectly revealed (1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 4:7; 13:1–4). But in Phil 1:29 grace is apparently connected with the suffering itself, not with the power to endure it or with the divine power revealed in it.

To be sure, those other ideas are present in the verses that precede this one, for there Paul asserts that the Philippians’ steadfastness and courage in the face of opposition is evidence of God working in them, a sign of their salvation (vv. 27–28). But when he continues his thought in verse 29, he seems to move in a different direction. Here the emphasis is on the suffering itself, and it is the fact that the suffering is “for Christ” or “on behalf of Christ” that is God’s gracious gift.²⁰ But in what way is *their* suffering on *his* behalf?

Like Paul, the Philippian church was experiencing persecution (1:28), though of what sort or what severity we do not know. They were most assuredly, however, suffering persecution as followers of Christ and in that sense “on his behalf.” In a world hostile to followers of Christ, the gift of faith was at the same time the “gift” of suffering. But Paul means much more than that. For Paul, believing in Christ meant believing *into* Christ.²¹ When believers were baptized they were baptized *into* Christ (Gal 3:27), into Christ’s body (1 Cor 12:13), into Christ’s death (Rom 6:3). These were not simply metaphors for joining the church, but described the reality of joining with Christ. The life of the faithful was life in union with Christ. It was “knowing” Christ by participating in Christ, which included sharing in his suffering in their daily lives (2 Cor 4:10–11) and experiencing there the power of his resurrection as well—*both* suffering *and* resurrection power, not one or the other.²² Suffering was part of the gracious gift of knowing Christ fully—a gift not just for Paul but also for all who were united with Christ in faith and baptism.

Moreover, in this particular passage the grace of their suffering is identified with “the same struggle” that Paul himself was enduring (Phil 1:30), a struggle linked not simply with belief in Christ or identification with Christ, but more specifically with proclamation of Christ (1:7, 16). An important part of the gracious privilege of suffering for Christ that the Philippians shared with Paul was the privilege of suffering for the procla-

mation of the gospel. Indeed, their suffering *was* the proclamation of the gospel, for Paul describes the gospel to which and for which they were graciously called as the gospel of the crucified Christ (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2; Gal 6:14; see also Phil 3:18; Gal 3:1). This gospel is embedded and embodied in the lives of believers (Phil 3:10–11); it is proclaimed through the lives of believers, insofar as their lives manifest not only the power of the resurrection but also—and especially—the suffering of the cross. The Philippians, Paul says, have thus been graciously privileged to share in the proclamation of the gospel of the crucified Christ through their lives. They are to understand their suffering as a gift, not because it has atoning value—only Christ’s death could accomplish that—or because it leads them to repentance, but because it marks their union with Christ and, like the eucharistic meal, proclaims his death until he returns (1 Cor 11:26).

This identification of grace with human suffering is a message both profound and disturbing. Paul instructs the Philippians to find evidence of God’s favor or grace not in power or prestige that sets them above others, but in suffering that unites them with others and promotes humility. This is a message that Paul develops at greatest length when writing to churches that tended toward (or had a significant number of members that tended toward) selfish ambition and inflated self-esteem.²³ It is, however, a message that carries significant risk in its contemporary application. Through it those who are weak and suffering can find meaning in their suffering, but they will find no critique of the causes of that suffering, no encouragement to resist or to overcome it.²⁴ It is a message that encourages humility—an important message for those inclined toward arrogance and greed, but a devastating one for those pushed by others into lives of humiliation and self-denial.²⁵ The crucial words “on behalf of Christ” can buffer the equation against gross misuse, and the reminder that the gracious favor of participation in Christ also includes participation in his resurrection power prevents the gift of suffering from being linked with any form of self-abasement. But experience has shown that the danger of misapplication is real, and we do well to remember that there are circumstances when suffering on behalf of Christ is not appropriately presented as part of God’s gracious gift.

Grace against the Law

The most distinctive understanding of grace to emerge in the Pauline letters, and the one most closely identified with Paul, is found exclusively in Romans and Galatians, where grace stands in stark opposition to the law

or works of law: “You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:4; see also 1:6; 2:21; Rom 3:24; 4:16; 6:14, 15; 11:6). Such a thought was inconceivable in Judaism, where obedience to the law was conducted within a framework of grace. In these letters the term “grace” has clearly acquired a new connotation, but there is no consensus over its precise nuance, for there is no agreement over what Paul means by the opposing term “law” (or “works of law”).

For Rudolf Bultmann, the law (as Paul construes it) reveals the basic human perversion of self-reliance. Encountered as God’s obligatory demand carrying the threat of judgment, the law inevitably evokes the sinful response of “self-powered striving . . . to procure salvation by [one’s] own strength.”²⁶ Paul’s objection to the law, then, is not directed against the difficulty of fulfilling its demands. It is directed against the system of works-righteousness (legalism) that the law supports, a system that feeds the sin of self-achievement and generates an attitude of boastful arrogance and self-righteousness. Over against this system of perverse striving stands grace, the pure gift of deliverance from judgment. With God taking the initiative by offering this gift freely, there is no room for human achievement, no basis for false pride. There can only be a response of obedient self-surrender.

Bultmann’s interpretation is a magisterial theological achievement of stunning scope and compelling power. It is also, however, almost certainly wrong. It imposes on Paul the concerns of the Reformation and a modern existentialist analysis of the human condition. Moreover, it grotesquely misrepresents first-century Judaism as a religion of “rebellious pride.”²⁷ Some continue to affirm this interpretation (though eliminating its anti-Jewish tone),²⁸ but it no longer dominates the field. Indeed, no single interpretation dominates the field. Instead, a range of plausible options exist that differ widely in their appraisal of the problem Paul sees with the law and thus also in the implications of opposing grace.

One option works with a view of legalism stripped of the objectionable features of pride and self-righteousness.²⁹ It is possible to view the law as God’s revealed will and understand salvation to be conditioned on obedience without concluding that obedience is always and necessarily an act of self-striving. Obedience could, for example, derive from a sincere desire to please God or to demonstrate one’s faithfulness to the covenant. But if this is closer to Paul’s understanding of Judaism, what is the basis for Paul’s objection? To what is grace opposed? Some suggest that the problem is one of human failure: “Paul thus believes that humans do not and (appar-

ently) cannot obey God's commandments in a way that satisfies divine requirements."³⁰ "Grace," then, "is the obvious antidote to the plight which resulted from life 'under law.'"³¹ If the old system that was centered on the law failed because of human inability to keep the law adequately, the new covenant eliminates law and works of law from any role in salvation: all is by grace.³²

In contrast to Bultmann's interpretation, this "softer" understanding of legalism does not fault the Jews for attempting to obey the law, but for failing to recognize their inability to succeed and their consequent need to rely on grace instead.³³ Nevertheless, it still rests on a distorted view of Judaism, for it ignores completely the important roles of human repentance and divine forgiveness in that religion.

A variant proposal frames the issue more radically. It is not that human weakness renders the law-based system impossible to satisfy; rather, God's new act in Christ renders the law-based system obsolete. Grace has invaded the world on the cross, a new principle of salvation has arrived, and to continue to rely on the law as the way to salvation is to fail to recognize that the rules have changed.³⁴ With the advent of Christ, salvation is by grace, not by works of the law.

While this understanding of the law-grace dichotomy does better justice to Paul's apocalyptic way of thinking,³⁵ it still rests on a distorted picture of Judaism. If Sanders is right (as I think he is), first-century Judaism understood well that salvation was by grace and did not regard it as something to be earned by works of the law. This proposal can therefore be maintained only by noting that the law-grace dichotomy is artificial, based either on a mistake by Paul³⁶ or on his questionable decision to misrepresent Judaism in order to buttress his argument.³⁷ Neither choice is particularly appealing.

A third proposal takes a different starting point. It proceeds from the assumption that in setting grace against the law Paul was not opposing the idea that one could earn salvation by obeying the law, because first-century Judaism did not hold that view. Instead, it assumes that Paul's objective was the full inclusion of Gentiles within the people of God. He was therefore opposing the idea promoted in Galatia that the law, and especially its requirement of circumcision, was a sign of Israel's privileged status, a boundary marker between those in and those out of the covenant. By opposing grace to this view of the law, Paul was opposing the idea of a limitation of divine favor to a single ethnic group.³⁸

The various proposals raise a number of questions about the way Paul construes grace in these passages. Is it the free gift of grace that is at the

center of Paul's thought in Galatians and Romans, a grace that negates any need to earn salvation? Or is it instead the breadth of God's grace that Paul has in mind, a grace that negates any restriction of salvation to those under the law? Perhaps we are wrong to seek for a single answer.³⁹ Perhaps Paul's thought, like grace itself, overflowed the logical constraints of his argument (Rom 5:20–21). Yet the fact that this distinctive law-grace opposition appears only in Galatians and Romans, letters where the question of the acceptance of Gentiles was paramount, provides strong support for Dunn's contention that the leading edge of Paul's purpose here was "to free both promise and law for a wider range of recipients, freed from the ethnic constraints which he saw to be narrowing the grace of God."⁴⁰

Yet strong objections have been raised against this proposal. Some are based on different readings of key texts, for Paul does not express himself as clearly as we would like, and he does not attempt—or, if he attempts, he does not achieve—the consistency of explication and application that would provide unambiguous access to his thought. There is, however, a deeper concern behind some of the objections. Justification by grace through faith is regarded by many as the heart of the Christian message. If, however, as some have argued, Paul developed this as a "polemical doctrine" in opposition to a specific position on circumcision that was emerging in Galatia, does that mean it was not foundational to his thought?⁴¹ And if it was not foundational, or if it did not mean for Paul what it means for Christians today, does that undermine Christian assurance and confidence?⁴² I think not, but this is a matter for theologians to explore. The pastoral and theological concerns of our own time and place must not, however, dictate what we are able to hear Paul saying in his time and place. And in the situation that emerged in Galatia, it seems to me that the radical inclusiveness of grace was at the center of his argument.

It thus seems ironic that Paul, having demolished the law as a barrier that denies Gentiles access to grace *as Gentiles*, then sets up a christological barrier that denies Jews access to grace *as Jews*.⁴³ It is, as John Barclay notes, a "subtly 'particularist claim to universalism'" that Paul presents in the name of grace, one that "ultimately delegitimize[s] Jews and all other non-Christians who cannot accept that they are simply 'on the way to destruction' (1 Cor. 1:18)."⁴⁴ He asks, "Does Paul have anything at all to offer a world that is not only multicultural but also multireligious?" and then provides an answer that is as thoughtful as any I have read. I quote it at length:

I think myself that Paul partially deconstructs his own Christological exclusivism by his pervasive appeal to the grace of God. The foundation of Paul's gospel, and the basis of his relativization of all cultures, is his radical appreciation of the grace of God which humbles human pride and subverts the theological and cultural edifices which "flesh" constructs. The justification of the ungodly and the gift of the Spirit are, for Paul, acts of grace which undermine absolute commitment to the law (Rom. 4:4–5; Gal. 3:1–5); he himself had experienced God's grace as calling into question all his previous cultural assurances (Gal. 1:13–16; 1 Cor. 15:8–10). Paul discerns the gracious initiative of God through Israel's history, and its paradoxical triumph precisely through her unbelief (Romans 9–11), since the God who has consigned all to disobedience will ultimately have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32). This radical notion of divine grace, which Paul uses to destabilize the church at least as much as those outside it (cf. 1 Corinthians *passim*), could serve both to affirm and to relativize the Christian tradition itself. The church exists not for its own sake but to bear witness to the grace of God. Paul himself is ultimately speechless before the mercy of God and cannot find even Christian language in which to express its significance (Rom. 11:33–36). To this extent, even Pauline theology could be mobilized to serve a multiculturalism whose religious basis is the affirming and relativizing grace of God.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Grace was not, for Paul, a static concept. It is reasonable to assume that before his encounter with Christ he shared the views of first-century Judaism and thus that he already had a lively sense of God's grace. His experience of Christ revealed a new locus of grace in the cross, which altered his understanding of the connection between grace and human suffering. His assessment of human vulnerability to sin seems also to have deepened, and with it his understanding of the power of forgiving grace. The conflict generated by his mission to the Gentiles opened his eyes to the radical inclusiveness of grace. Grace was, it seems, on the growing edge of his theology. And he presents us with a choice, either to take his insights as a normative expression of grace, or to follow his lead in probing further its limits.